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(54) Bipolar plate for a fuel cell

(57) A bipolar plate for a fuel cell, the bipolar plate comprises a central area (31) and a surrounding area (33), wherein the central area has a first side surface (32) and a second side surface opposed to the first side surface, the central area is in a form of continuous corrugation which defines a plurality of grooves that are substantially parallel with and complementary to each other on each of the first side surface and the second side surface. The thickness of the bipolar plate of this invention can be very thin so as to decrease the dimension and weight of the fuel cell. The cost for manufacturing the fuel cell is also reduced by the simplified process of this invention.

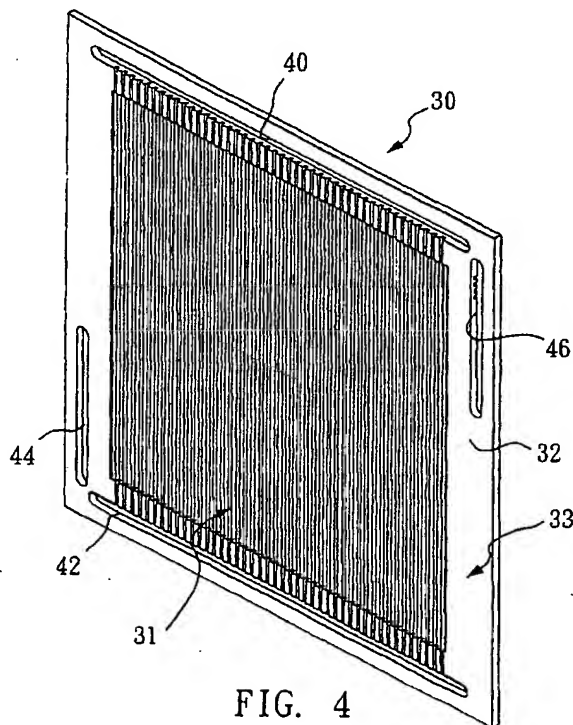


FIG. 4

Description

Not Applicable

Statement Regarding Federally Sponsored Research or Development

Not Applicable

Background of the Invention

Field of the Invention

[0001] The present invention relates to a bipolar plate for a fuel cell, in particular, a corrugated bipolar plate made of metal. The bipolar plate provided by this invention can simplify the manufacturing process of the fuel cell and thus, reduce the production costs. Specially, the dimension and weight of the fuel cell can be decreased such that the actual utilization and mass production of the fuel cell become more convenient and practical.

Description of the Related Art

[0002] With the rapid growth of human civilization, the consumption of traditional energy sources, such as coal, oil and natural gas, increases rapidly. This has resulted in a serious pollution to the global environment, as well as various environmental problems such as global warming and acid rain. It is now recognized that the natural energy resources are limited. Therefore, if the present rate of consumption continues, all existing natural energy sources will be exhausted in the near future. Accordingly, many developed countries are dedicated to research and development of new and replaceable energy sources. The fuel cell is one of the most important and reasonably priced choices. Compared with traditional internal combustion engines, the fuel cell has many advantages such as high energy transformation efficiency, clean exhaust, low noise, and no consumption of traditional gasoline.

[0003] In brief, a fuel cell is an electrical power generation device powered by the electrochemical reaction of hydrogen and oxygen. In basic term, the reaction is a reverse reaction of the electrolysis of water, to transfer the chemical energy into electrical energy. The basic construction of a fuel cell, for example, a proton exchange membrane fuel cell, comprises a plurality of cell units. The construction of the cell unit can be generally illustrated in Fig. 1. It comprises a proton exchange membrane (PEM) 10 at the middle, with the two sides thereof provided with a layer of catalyst 12, each of the two outsides of the catalyst 12 being further provided with a gas diffusion layer (GDL) 14. An anode plate 16 and a cathode plate 18 are further provided at the outermost sides adjacent to the GDL 14. After tightly combining all the above elements together, a cell unit is formed. For the practical application of a fuel cell, a plu-

rality of the above cell units are stacked and serially connected to provide sufficient power, as illustrated in Fig. 2. Therefore, two adjacent cell units can share a common polar plate 20, as illustrated in Fig. 3, which serves as the anode and the cathode for the two adjacent cell units respectively. Accordingly, such a polar plate 20 is usually referred to as a bipolar plate.

[0004] Generally, as illustrated in Fig. 3, the two sides of the bipolar plate 20 are provided with many grooves 22 for transporting the gases for reaction, such as hydrogen and air (to provide oxygen), as well as moving the reactants, such as water droplet or vapor, out of the bipolar plate 20. The conventional bipolar plate 20 is made of pure graphite or a graphite composite. Thus, the grooves on the graphite plate are usually formed by additional mechanical machining with complicated processes and at considerable cost. In addition, if the graphite plate is made by the compression molding of graphite powder, it must be further coated with resin or other material to seal the voids thereof. Moreover, graphite plate has a relatively low extensibility and thus cracks can be formed very easily. The crack on the bipolar plate may introduce leakage of gas and thereby impair the operation efficiency of the fuel cell. Furthermore, due to the requirement of adequate mechanical strength, the thickness of the graphite plate cannot be very thin, so the overall dimension occupied by the fuel cell cannot be further reduced.

Brief Summary of the Invention

[0005] It is a primary objective of this invention to overcome the disadvantages of the conventional bipolar plate and to provide a bipolar plate that is thin, light, made by a simplified process, and has a low cost to manufacture. Accordingly, the space occupied by the fuel cell can be reduced and the manufacturing cost of the fuel cell can be lowered, so that the fuel cell is suitable for mass production and commercialization.

[0006] The major technical content of this invention is to make a corrugated bipolar plate from a metal sheet and form a plurality of parallel grooves which are complementary to each other on the two side surfaces of the bipolar plate. Because the bipolar plate of this invention is made of metal, the thickness thereof can be relatively thin and, the dimension and weight of the fuel cell can be significantly reduced. In addition, the manufacturing processes of the bipolar plate are simplified and the relative costs can be decreased.

[0007] The structures and characteristics of this invention can be realized by referring to the appended drawings and explanations of the preferred embodiments.

Brief Description of the Several Views of the Drawings

[0008]

Fig. 1 is a schematic cross sectional view showing the structure of a cell unit of a conventional fuel cell;

Fig. 2 is a schematic cross sectional view showing the structure of combining a plurality of the conventional cell units;

Fig. 3 is a schematic cross sectional view showing a portion of the conventional fuel cell;

Fig. 4 is a schematic perspective view of a bipolar plate according to a preferred embodiment of this invention;

Fig. 5 is a schematic plan view showing a first side surface of the bipolar plate of Fig. 4;

Fig. 6 is a schematic plan view showing a second side surface of the bipolar plate of Fig. 4;

Fig. 7 is a cross sectional view taken along line 7-7 of Fig. 5; and

Fig. 8 is a schematic cross sectional view showing a portion of the fuel cell utilizing the bipolar plate according to the preferred embodiment of this invention.

Detailed Description of the Invention

[0009] This invention discloses a bipolar plate 30 for a fuel cell and one of the preferred embodiment is illustrated in Figs. 4 to 7. The bipolar plate 30 comprises a central area 31 which is made of metal sheet, and a surrounding area 33 which is made of plastic or other appropriate material. In the preferred embodiment of this invention, the metallic central area 31 is first formed by punching, and the surrounding area 33 is formed by the injection of plastic molding. The central area 31 has a first side surface 32, and a second side surface 34 opposite to the first side surface 32. The metal sheet of the central area 31 is in a form of continuous corrugation and the corrugated grooves thereof are parallel with each other. As can be seen in the cross sectional view of Fig. 7, the wave-like continuous corrugation is provided on the first side surface 32 and the second side surface 34 in a complementary manner to form a plurality of extended grooves 36 and 38 thereon respectively so that the cathode gas and the anode gas which need to be definitely separated can be individually directed into the grooves 36 and 38.

[0010] In the preferred embodiment of this invention, the plastic surrounding area 33 of the bipolar plate 30 is further provided with a plurality of elongated holes 40,

42, 44 and 46 near the edge thereof, wherein two of the first holes 40 and 42 are connected with the two open ends of the parallel grooves 36 on the first side surface 32 for input/output of gas. Similarly, the second side surface 34 of the bipolar plate 30 includes two second holes 44 and 46 as well as channels 48, as can be seen in Fig. 6, which are connected with the two open ends of the parallel grooves 38 on the second side surface 34.

[0011] Fig. 8 schematically shows the actual application of this invention in the fuel cell. Because the central area 31 of the bipolar plate 30 of this invention is made of metal, it can be punched directly to form the corrugated shape. Therefore, most of the complicated processes for mechanical machining of the conventional bipolar plate can be eliminated and the manufacturing costs for the fuel cell will decrease correspondingly. Furthermore, metallic material can provide sufficient mechanical strength and thus, the thickness of the bipolar plate can be significantly reduced, for example, to the extent of approximately 0.01 cm. As a result, the amount of material for making the bipolar plate can be reduced, as well as the overall dimensions and weight of the fuel cell.

[0012] This invention is related to a unique creation that makes a breakthrough to conventional art. Aforementioned explanations, however, are directed to the description of preferred embodiments according to this invention. Various changes and implementations can be made by those skilled in the art without departing from the technical concept of this invention. Since this invention is not limited to the specific details described in connection with the preferred embodiments, changes to certain features of the preferred embodiments without altering the overall basic function of the invention are contemplated within the scope of the appended claims.

Sequence Listing

[0013]

- 10 proton exchange membrane
- 12 catalyst
- 14 gas diffusion layer
- 16 anode plate
- 18 cathode plate
- 20 bipolar plate
- 22 grooves
- 30 bipolar plate
- 31 central area
- 32 first side surface

33 surrounding area

34 second side surface

36 grooves 5

38 grooves

40 first hole 10

42 first hole

44 second hole

46 second hole 15

48 channels

Claims 20

1. A bipolar plate for a fuel cell, comprises a central area and a surrounding area, wherein the central area has a first side surface and a second side surface opposed to the first side surface, the central area is configured to a corrugated form which defines a plurality of grooves that are formed on the first side surface and the second side surface, the grooves being substantially parallel with and complementary to each other. 25 30
2. The bipolar plate according to Claim 1, wherein the central area is made of metal sheet.
3. The bipolar plate according to Claim 2, wherein the corrugated form is obtained by punching the central area. 35
4. The bipolar plate according to Claim 1, wherein the surrounding area is made of plastic material. 40
5. The bipolar plate according to Claim 4, wherein the surrounding area further includes two first holes, and each of the parallel grooves formed on the first side surface further has two first openings connected respectively to each of the two first holes. 45
6. The bipolar plate according to Claim 5, wherein the surrounding area further includes two second holes, and each of the parallel grooves formed on the second side surface further has two second openings connected to each of the two second holes, respectively. 50

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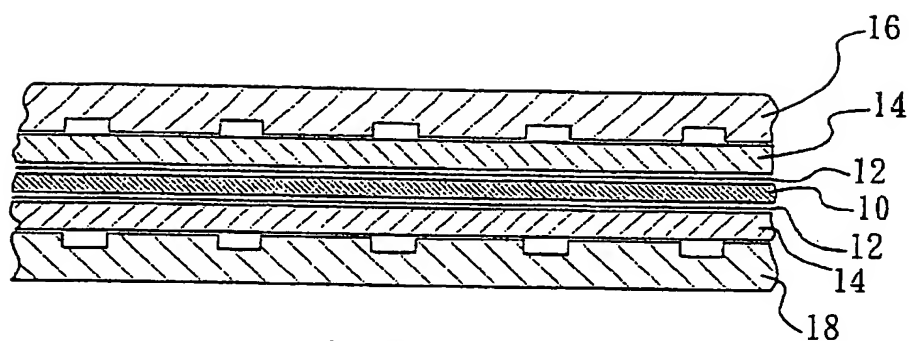


FIG. 1
(PRIOR ART)

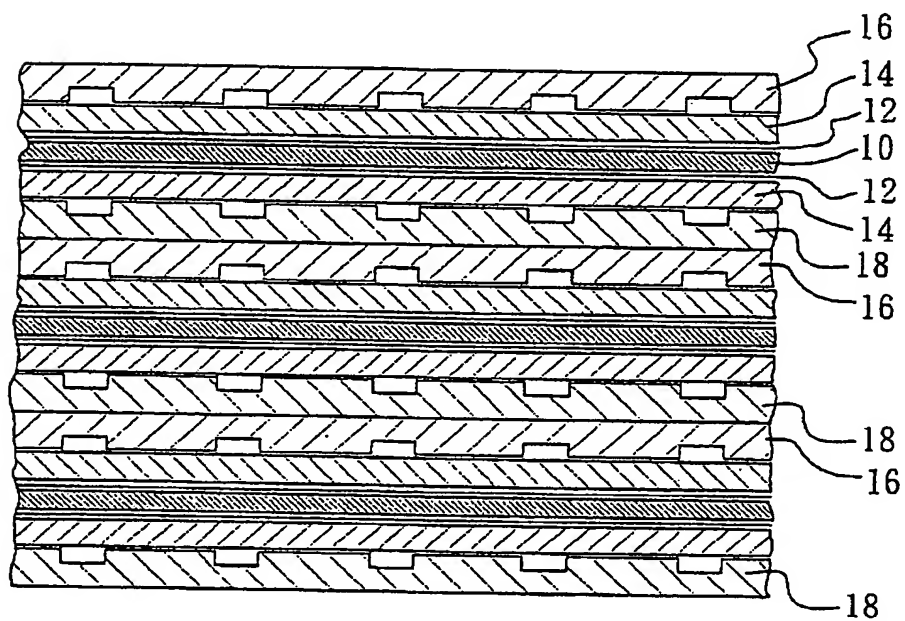


FIG. 2
(PRIOR ART)

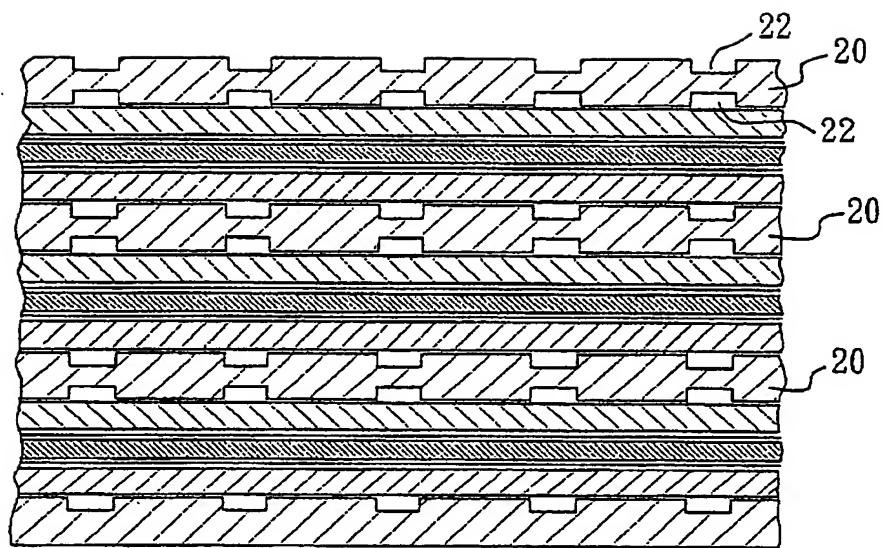


FIG. 3
(PRIOR ART)

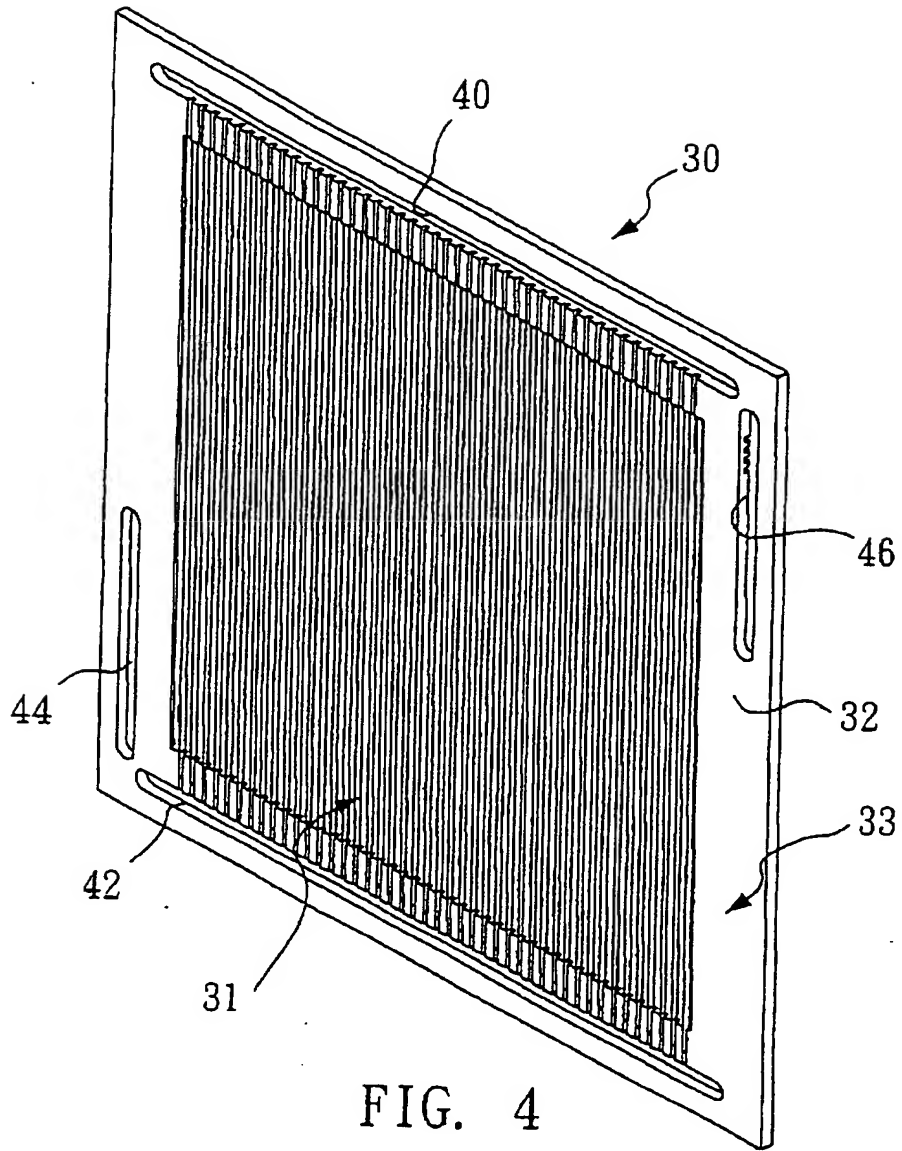


FIG. 4

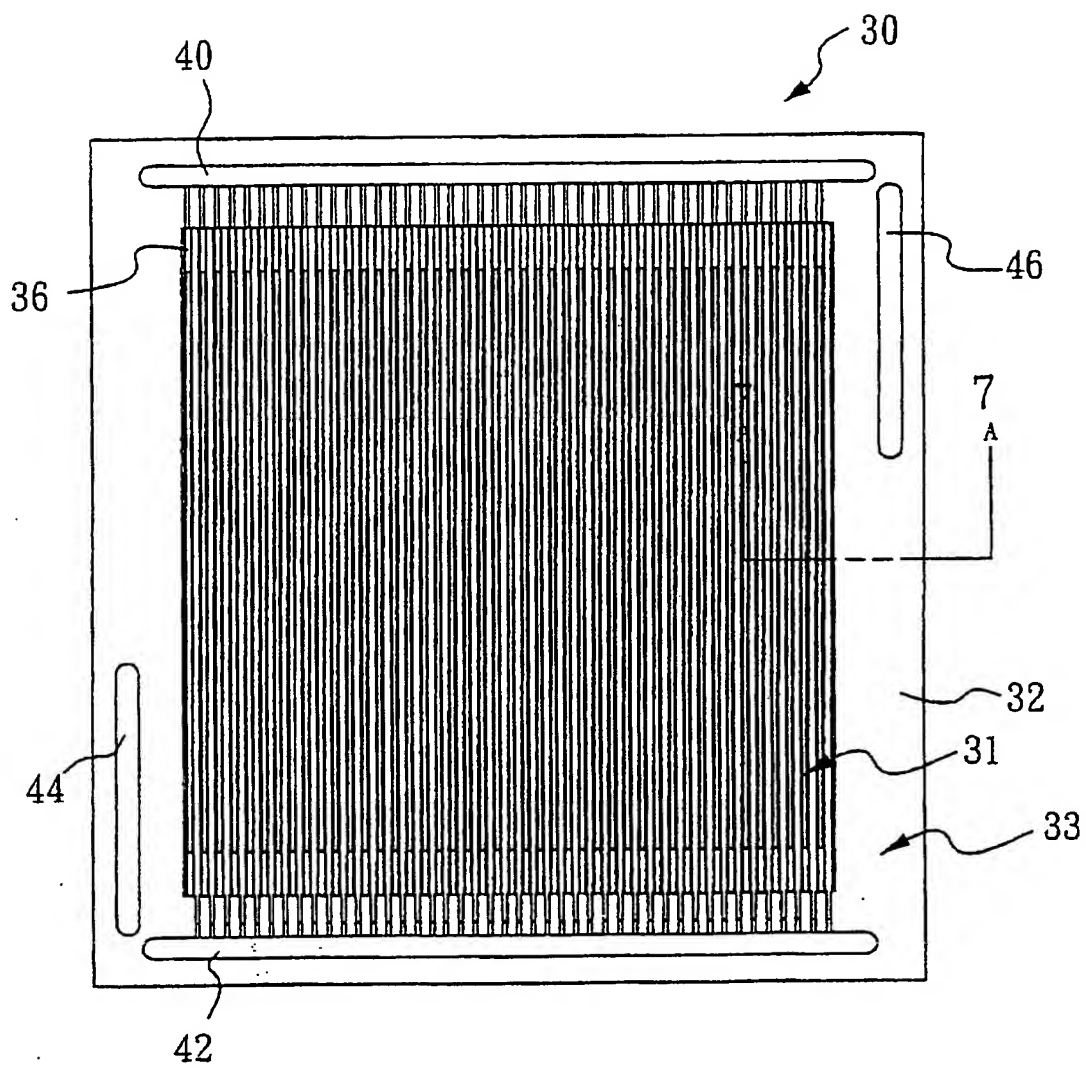


FIG. 5

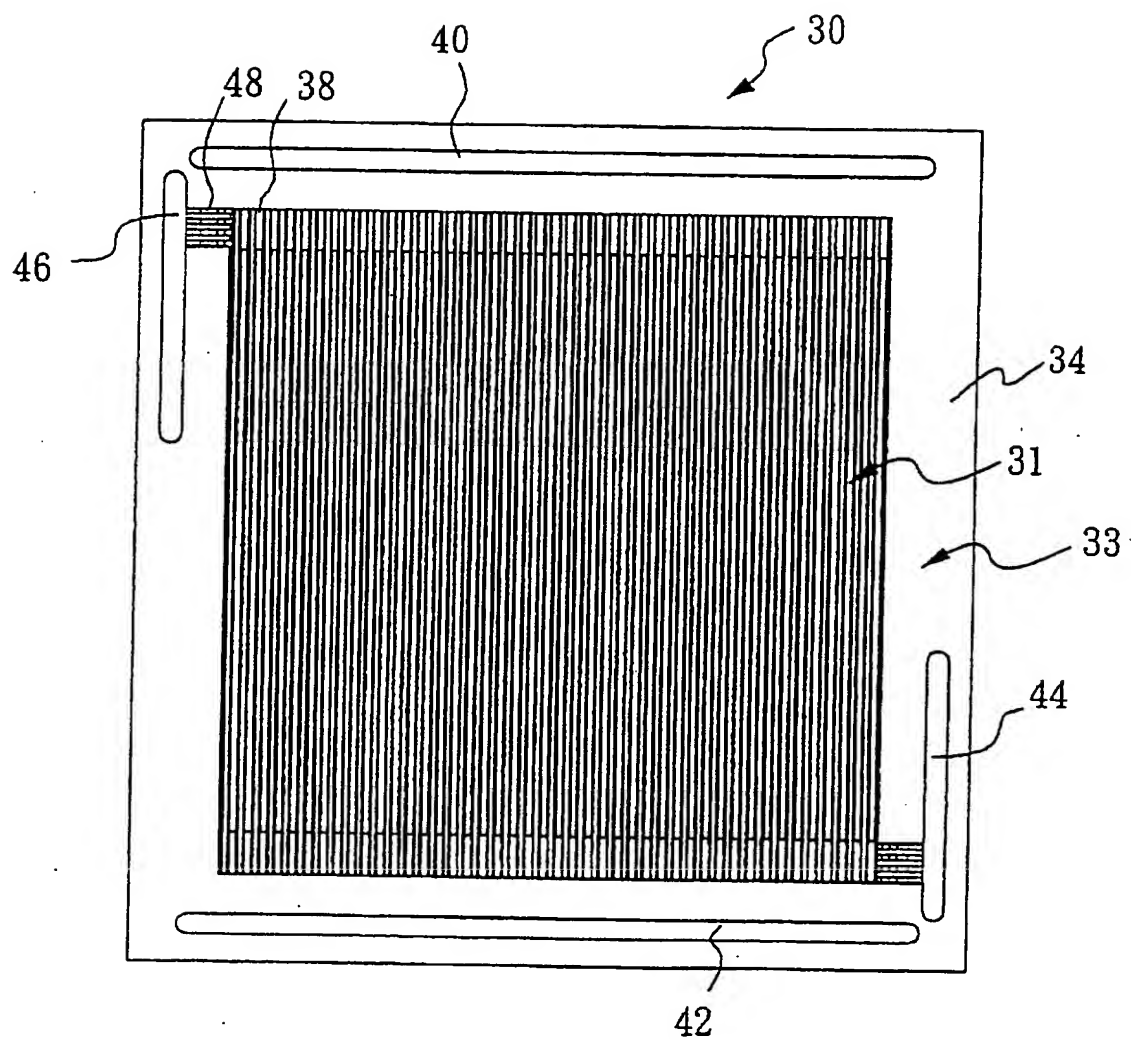


FIG. 6

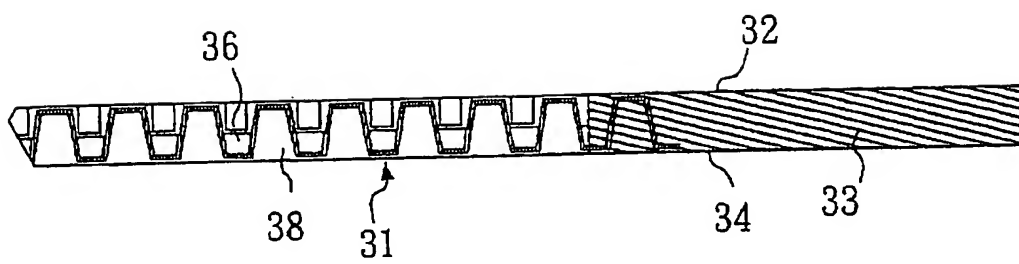


FIG. 7

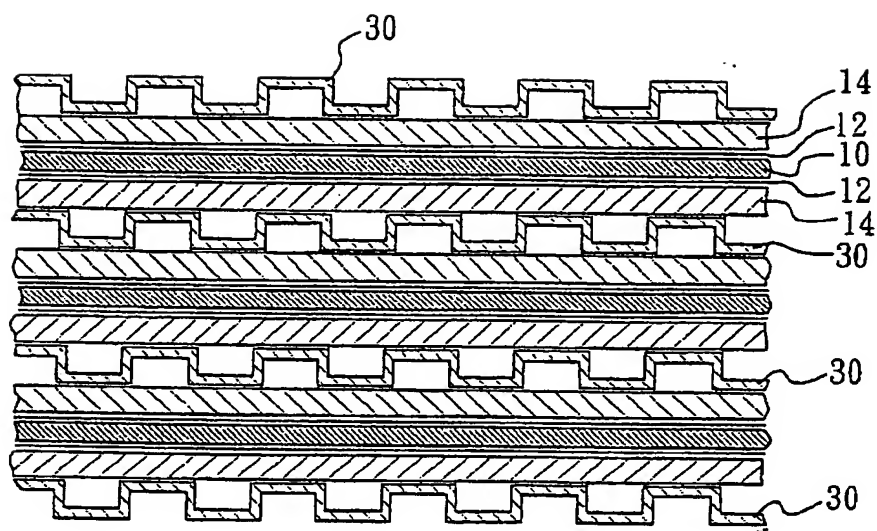


FIG. 8

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